Is journalism best located in the creative arts or as a communication discipline?

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Abstract

This paper considers the implications of journalism research being located within the Field of Research associated with the creative arts and writing in the recent Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) evaluations. While noting that this classification does capture a significant trajectory in Australian journalism research, it also points to some anomalous implications of understanding journalism as an arts discipline, given its historical co-location in universities with communications disciplines, and the mutually reinforcing relationships between the two fields.

Some years ago I met with a senior representative of Australian Education International based at the Australian Embassy in Beijing. He faced an unenviable task, as one important part of his job was to advise the parents of would-be students from China about which Australian university their child should attend. His job required him to maintain the proposition that all of Australia's 41 higher education providers were equally good at every subject in which parents may wish to enrol their child. He made the point that he didn't believe it, and they didn't believe it, but his employment contract as a representative of the Australian Government prevented him from saying otherwise. He was to represent all of Australia's universities equally in the absence of other information.

In this respect at least, exercises such as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) evaluations, administered by the Australian Research Council for the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Kim Carr, can be welcomed. At least in the research sphere, there is now some publicly available information that identifies areas of research strength among Australia's universities. This is not to say the data cannot be misused. The construction of national "league tables" that claim particular universities to be number one, top three, top 10, and so on, actually are misrepresentations of the data at various levels, particularly with the claim that discipline-specific rankings can be aggregated upwards to a university-wide figure. Nonetheless, ERA has provided the metrics we all now work with, and it would appear highly likely that it will remain a key part of Australia's higher education landscape for some years to come.

The research outputs coming from Australia's journalism departments were ranked in Field of Research (FoR) 1903 Journalism and Professional Writing. The ARC reviewers identified 12 universities as having met the Units of Evaluation threshold, and evaluated 1071 research outputs over the period from January 1, 2003, to December 31, 2008, generated by 107 full-time equivalent (FTE) academics who also earned $1.43 million in research income over the period. Eight universities were observed as having produced "world standard" outputs, including my own, the Queensland University of Technology. However, only one – the University of Melbourne – was considered to be "above world standard", and it is not typically considered to be a major journalism teaching university. Interestingly, 60 per cent of the research outputs evaluated in FoR 1903 were "Non-Traditional Research Outputs" (NTROs), defined by the ARC as "research outputs which do not take the form of traditional research books, book chapters, journal articles or conference publications" (ARC, 2011, p. 291).

A deeper trawl into the ERA Guidelines found the following definition of an NTRO:

> For disciplines in which non-traditional research output types may be submitted (see the Discipline Matrices), eligible research output types include the following non-traditional research output types:
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> - Original Creative Works;
> - Live Performance of Creative Works;
> - Recorded/Rendered Creative Works; and
> - Curated or Produced Substantial Public Exhibitions and Events. (ARC, 2009, p. 41)

Original Creative Works typically took one of four forms:

Research output	Description
Visual art work	A research output such as a fine arts and crafts work, diagram, map, photographic image, sculpture or installation.
Design/architectural work	Realised, constructed, fabricated or unrealised building and design projects. Unrealised projects must have an output that provides evidence of the research involved.
Textual work	Written creative work that is not eligible to be submitted as a book or journal article, such as a novel or art review. Exhibition catalogues and catalogue entries should be submitted in this sub-category.
Other	Other original creative works that do not fit the other research output types.

Source: ARC, 2009, p. 43

In my view, one of the most interesting aspects of the ERA process as it relates to journalism concerns the decision to locate it within FoR19, Studies in Creative Arts and Writing, rather than FoR20, Language, Communication and Culture. If we compare FoR1903 Journalism and Professional Writing with other FoR19 codes, and with equivalent FoR20 codes, the call to place journalism in FoR19 in terms of the predominance of NTROs among its research outputs would appear to be justified:

Table 1: Percentage of research outputs by type based on FoR discipline ccode, Australia 2003-2008

	Books	Book chapters	Journal articles	Conference papers	NTROs
1902 Film, Television and Digital Media	3	13	20	10	54
1903 Journalism and Professional Writing	3	6	22	9	60
1904 Performing Arts and Creative Writing	1	7	12	6	74
2001 Communication and Media Studies	5	29	42	21	3
2002 Cultural Studies	6	34	46	10	3

Source: ARC, 2011, pp. 184-185, 190-191

Based on these figures, then, journalism research in Australia does indeed more closely resemble that of the creative and performing arts than it does that of communication and media studies or other "new humanities" disciplines. But there would seem to me to be some questions that arise from such a finding. The first relates to the productivity of Australia's journalism academics in producing high-quality non-traditional research outputs. Based on the figures below, it would suggest that each journalism academic in Australia who is considered research active is producing almost one NTRO over a six-year cycle, a level of research productivity in NTROs that is higher than that of those engaged in Film, Television and Digital Media, and almost as high as those in the Performing Arts and Creative Writing, which includes fields such as Music, Dance and Drama, where NTROs are clearly core business.

Table 2: Number of Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs) per full-time effective (FTE) university academic, 2003-2008

	FTEs	NTROs	NTROs/FTE	NTROs/FTE per year (/6)
1902 Film, Television and Digital Media	255	2,138	.838	.139
1903 Journalism and Professional Writing	107	1,071	1	.166
1904 Performing Arts and Creative Writing	589	6,166	1.046	.174

Source: ARC, 2011, pp. 184-185.

The second point to be made is that the positioning of journalism in the creative arts in Australia is unusual by international standards. In the United States, where "J-schools" had their historical origins, they typically emerged in departments that linked journalism with mass communication, as seen in the role of entities such as the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), and the role played in course accreditation by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). The latter is notable in seeing the development of craft and professional skills for journalism graduates as being best served by a curriculum that "embraces the value of a liberal arts and sciences curriculum as the essential foundation for professional education in journalism and mass communications" (ACEJMC, 2009). In his review of journalism education worldwide, and drawing on the extensive analyses of James Carey on this subject, Stuart Adam (2010) argued that the liberal arts and sciences, media and communication studies, and professional practice constitute the three pillars of a journalism education oriented towards a civic vocation.

The third point to be made is that a renewed focus on journalism research as being primarily about generating its own outputs that are "non-traditional", as understood by entities such as the Australian Research Council, is a different one to where many journalism educators have been directing their energies, which has been towards academic journals and conferences broadly connected to communication and media studies. In my own engagement over a decade with the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA), I would observe that journalism studies has been one of its liveliest divisions, with its presence at ANZCA conferences becoming more important over the past five years. Since its establishment in 1999, the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communications Association has experienced rapid growth, and journalism education and research is a very important component of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), which was chaired by Beate Josephi from Edith Cowan University during the 2000s.

In the Presidential Address to the 2010 ICA Conference, Barbie Zelizer argued that journalism and communication have developed in a symbiotic relationship in the academy, even if the significance of journalism is frequently downplayed in histories of the communications discipline:

> In practice and study, both projects had many attributes that endeared them to the other. Both were born in and of a certain kind of modernity: journalism, richly implicated in the quest for truth, saw rationality, objectivity, impartiality, and reason

> as the modes of engagement, which its model of professionalism could offer those wanting to know more about the larger world, in much the same way that communication provided a set of reasoned and predictable operations by which the drums of free choice, consent, progress, science, democracy, and individualism could best stifle those of inequality, ignorance, and injustice.
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> … Journalism, like other areas of practice-oriented scholarship … could thus offer the field of communication a place in the real world, a reminder of why its scholarship mattered, with the media in particular seen as a useful vehicle for modernity's dissemination. This meant that even if the set of assumptions that fueled an association between journalism and communication envisioned only a particular kind of modernity, it proliferated nonetheless. (Zelizer, 2011, pp. 3-4)

If Zelizer's account is correct, the question arises of what may be lost in the Australian context if journalism education drifts away from communication and media studies as a result of the FoR coding of journalism in the creative arts and writing fields of study.

I was reminded of this in a recent exercise in reviewing the journalism curriculum at QUT. In seeking advice on what are considered the appropriate national academic standards for a journalism curriculum, I was directed to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's Learning and Teaching Statement for the Creative and Performing Arts (ALTC, 2010). Developed by leaders in the fields of drama, dance, music, screen production, creative writing and the visual arts, it identifies a threshold graduate skill as being to "apply relevant skills and knowledge to produce and realise works, artefacts and forms of *creative expression*" (ALTC, 2010, p. 12, my emphasis). If we are happy with the proposition that journalism is essentially a creative practice, then journalism is correctly located in the creative arts. But that seems an unusual proposition in the light of a range of debates about the fact-seeking and truth-telling role of the professional journalist in complex modern societies, and the role played by journalism research and teaching in the inculcation of such ethical and professional values.

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